



Sustainability Series
Number 1
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Building a Strong Reading Culture

What You Can Do

Components of
a Strong
Reading Culture

The Role of the
Principal

Identifying and
Overcoming
Barriers



Welcome

This brief was designed to assist education leaders at all levels—school, district, and state—to sustain the success of the Reading First initiative in teaching students to read well. Reading culture is an important aspect of the scientifically based school-wide reading models established with Reading First funds. For our purposes, we’ve defined culture simply as “how we do things here.” In that sense, reading culture is simply, but importantly, “how we do things here related to reading.” This brief looks at what it takes to create the conditions for widespread success—to create a strong reading culture in a school—and thereby to bring more students to benchmark levels in reading.

This brief, first in a series addressing key aspects of sustainability, can be useful in workshops designed to help leaders in your school, district, or state sustain the success they have established through the Reading First initiative. Other aspects of sustaining school-wide reading models that are based on scientific research will be addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website to see when new briefs will be available.

This brief was written by Stan Paine, who works with the Western Regional Reading First Technical Assistance Center (WRRFTAC) where he provides technical assistance to states, districts, and schools on sustainability and leadership for Reading First programs. Prior to joining WRRFTAC, Dr. Paine was an elementary school principal for 22 years. In 1997, Dr. Paine was named as a National Distinguished Principal and as the Oregon Elementary School Principal-of-the-Year for his work in beginning reading, student conduct, and parent/community involvement.

Sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time while maintaining improved or enhanced outcomes.

-adapted from Century and Levy, 2002



What is Culture?

What is a school culture? How can thinking about culture lead to improved outcomes in reading?

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Changing student
outcomes is about
changing a school's
culture, changing
"how we do things
here."

If outcomes matter,
then culture also
matters.

What is Culture?

Culture, in the anthropological sense, can be thought of as “how a group of people do things,” how they greet one another and communicate, how they dress, eat, work and play. Therefore school reading culture can be defined as how a group of people teach reading: how we select and use instructional materials, how we address individual students’ instructional needs, how and when we assess students’ skills and use assessment information, how we use available instructional time, and how we learn and collaborate with one another.

For our purposes, let’s define culture simply as “how we do things here.” In that sense, “*reading culture*” is simply, but importantly, “how we do things here” related to reading.

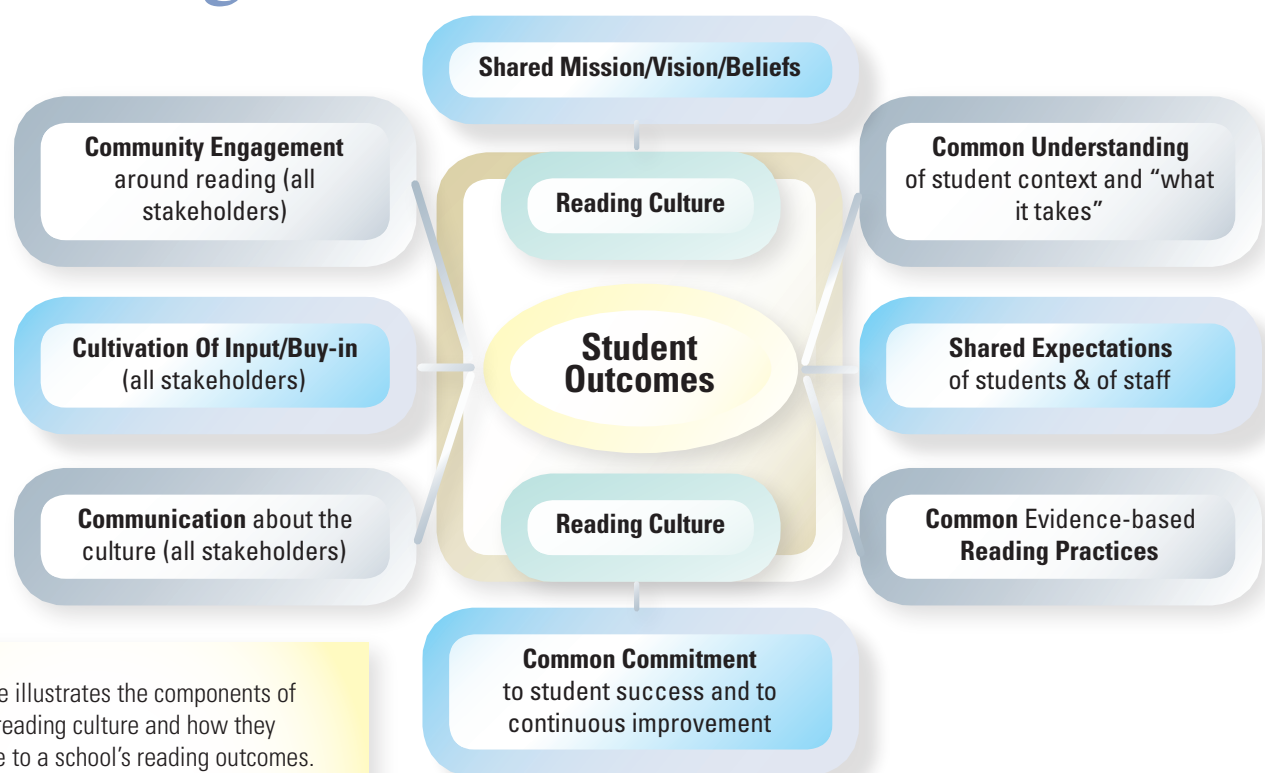
More than an effective practice by an individual teacher, culture is how we act collectively, as a school community, to address the needs of all of our students. What it takes to act collectively for a purpose, of course, is strong leadership. Therefore the responsibility for building and sustaining a strong reading culture in a school falls to the one person in most schools who has the authority to make it happen: the principal.

In the Reading First Context

Some would say that culture, in a school context, is a slippery concept. It is hard to grab hold of and pin down, and perhaps might best be left alone. But in the battle for literacy, where the goal is ambitious-- to have all children reading on grade level by the end of third grade-- we cannot afford to leave any potential resource untapped. We must explore all the variables that schools use to bring large numbers of their students into the fold of successful readers.

One of the most powerful, and most affordable, of these variables is the school reading culture. We assert that it is not only possible, but vital, to define a school’s reading culture, and to develop and sustain a culture that supports reading success over time. Let’s look at what it takes to create the conditions for widespread success, via a strong reading culture in a school.

Components of a Strong Reading Culture



This figure illustrates the components of a school reading culture and how they contribute to a school's reading outcomes. Notice that the essential functions are *engaging* and *communicating* with stakeholders to establish common ground for teaching and learning.

The components of a reading culture contribute to a school's reading outcomes. The essential functions include engaging and communicating with stakeholders to establish common ground for teaching and learning.

Shared Mission is Imperative

As this figure illustrates, common ground around reading creates a strong reading culture. Members of the school community must have a shared mission (sense of purpose), a shared vision of what they want to achieve, and shared beliefs that the desired outcome is attainable. They must also have a common understanding about what it takes on their part to achieve this vision and have a common commitment to it. Finally, they must have a common set of reading-related practices so that they can collaborate on student programs, agree on what needs to be done, and communicate effectively about what they are doing.

Leadership is Crucial

As part of what needs to be done in leading instructional staff toward a strong reading culture, principals must articulate high expectations of all staff and hold them accountable for working toward these expectations. They must also engage staff and other stakeholders working toward this outcome; cultivate stakeholder participation in supporting the process; and communicate the reading mission and vision, how the school is progressing toward this outcome and how the support of the stakeholders is needed to continue moving toward the vision. This process is the essence of leadership when the goal is improved performance of the organization.

The Role of the Principal

The tables on the next page identify what principals and other

school leaders can do to develop and maintain an effective reading culture in their school. While the principal most assuredly needs the support of other leaders in the school's reading initiative (coach, reading team members, grade-level leaders), the principal is the one person in the school who has the authority to assure that these things happen,

and can follow up if they don't. Thus, it is

imperative that the principal plays a strong role in developing and

sustaining a strong reading culture in the school.

The principal is the one person in the school who has the authority to assure that change happens.

What can the principal do?

Engage, Guide, and Motivate

ALL STAKEHOLDERS

1. Engage staff, parents, students, district, and community in the goal of improving student reading achievement.
2. Cultivate shared mission, vision, and beliefs about student reading achievement; seek input from all stakeholders. This should include targeting new members, as they arrive.
3. Convey the context and urgency of working toward and attaining this goal.
4. Identify and communicate roles for all stakeholders in the reading improvement process.
5. Support and acknowledge all stakeholders for their involvement.
6. Communicate with all stakeholders regularly. Share results and continuing needs; revisit the mission, vision, and goals

Lead, Direct, and Manage

ALL STAFF

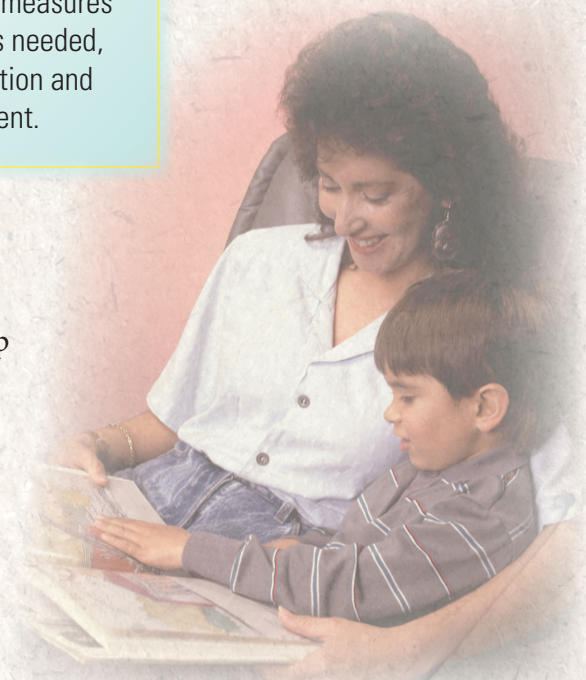
1. Work toward consensus on clear mission, vision, and belief statements. Ask all staff to commit to working toward them.
2. Establish a common understanding of the student context, the urgency of the need for improved reading outcomes, and the possibility of achieving them.
3. Establish clear goals for student learning and clear expectations of staff.
4. Establish common practices ("how we do things here") for reading assessment and instruction.
5. Support and supervise staff during delivery, and follow through on commitments and practices.
6. Monitor performance measures and adjust support, as needed, to assure implementation and continuous improvement.

"What does it take to sustain an effective reading program? That which is worth sustaining is best supported not by a person but by a system and its culture. Build and nurture the system and its culture."

(Hargreaves and Goodson, 2006)¹

Guide Changes Through:

- ♦ **Communications:** one-on-one interactions, small group meetings, staff meetings, other stakeholder (e.g., parent) meetings, and written communications.
- ♦ **Professional Development:** supervision and support processes, and day-to-day interactions.
- ♦ **Progressive Improvement:** monitoring outcomes and adjusting procedures, engaging stakeholders, and celebrating progress.



¹ Hargreaves, A. & Goodson, I. (2006). Educational change over time? The sustainability and nonsustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 42: 3-41.

Everyone Plays a Part

All components of a school system influence a school's academic culture and its ability to produce strong outcomes. The very nature of systems makes this so; a system is composed of multiple parts and functions, all working together for a common purpose. At the district and school levels, instructional, operational, fiscal, and personnel functions must all work together to enable schools and teachers to deliver effective instruction. At the school and classroom levels, structural and organizational elements must coordinate with classroom, Title 1, English language learners

and special education functions to serve the instructional needs of all students.

While the principal has the key responsibility in establishing and maintaining a strong reading culture, other staff members and stakeholders also have roles to play in this process. The table on the next page illustrates some of these roles.



Your Role in Supporting School Reading Culture

Reading Coach

Support high fidelity implementation of all program elements (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment), articulate and reinforce elements of culture.

Instructional Assistants

Participate in all training and coaching offered to support the instructional & assessment functions; follow classroom and school leaders in supporting all elements of program and culture.

Superintendent, School Board

Provide clear and visible support for staff related to program goals, support elements of culture related to position, be aware of and remain current on program results and needs, communicate high expectations of students and staff, engage community stakeholders in the program.

Principal

Engage, guide, and motivate stakeholders; lead, direct, and manage staff (see *The Role of the Principal*).

Classroom Teachers

Implement program elements with high fidelity; participate in collaborative processes with other staff; serve in leadership roles.

Support Staff

Provide support as assigned for key functions (e.g., assessment data input, professional development arrangements); support elements of culture related to own position; help engage parents and community stakeholders in program goals, as program allows.

Parents

Learn about program goals, outcomes, and needs; ensure that children read regularly at home; learn about and support elements of school reading culture; send kids to school punctually, and with high expectations and readiness to learn; communicate with teacher about child's progress and how to support it at home.

Instructional Specialists

Collaborate with classroom teachers and building leaders to create a unified instructional system for all staff; share common understanding, expectations, commitments, and practices with other staff.

District Directors, Coordinators

Provide clear, visible support for the staff related to program goals; support elements of culture related to position (e.g., mission/vision); be aware of and remain current on program results and needs; communicate high expectations of students and staff; engage superintendent and board in the program.

Community Partners and Leaders

Learn about program goals, outcomes, and needs; support elements of culture related to position.



Identifying and Overcoming Barriers

There are many potential barriers to establishing and sustaining a strong reading culture in a school. In creating the conditions upon which to build a school-wide reading initiative such as Reading First, a school staff must first get past the issue of reading philosophies (the false dichotomy of phonics vs. whole language, for example) and subsequently focus on the materials and instructional strategies that will be implemented by all staff,

such as common goals and practices.

Arguments in these “reading wars” have diverted us from reading outcomes for far too many years. These and many other issues can stall or derail progress in producing improved student outcomes—issues such as personnel, structural and organizational components, and changing priorities, for example. Some of these barriers, along with suggested strategies for overcoming them, are illustrated below.

Potential Barriers	Strategies for Overcoming Barriers	Who can effect change?
Change of Principal	Hire those committed to Reading First goals & student achievement	Community Superintendents District Level Hiring Committees
Insufficient Support from Principal	Align principal job description with goals, provide supervision w/program elements; coach principal on increasing support for program by building culture	Community Superintendents Leadership Coaches Curriculum Specialists
Change of Coach	“Grow coaches” from within the district; mentor new coaches	Community Superintendents Leadership Coaches District Level Reading Specialists Principals
Loss of Coaching Position	Consider Title 1, 2a, district, or other resources to replace this function on at least a part-time basis; ask how else the most essential coaching functions can be fulfilled	Principals District Level Reading Specialists
Teacher Turnover	Hire and assign teachers based on reading-related hiring criteria; provide training, coaching, and mentoring for new teachers on reading program elements and cultural components	Principals Veteran Teachers Instructional Leaders Reading Coaches
Changing Priorities	Incorporate into existing priorities while retaining focus on reading goals; delegate, defer, and deflect new priorities when integration is not possible	Principals Superintendents District Officials
Procedural Drift*	Increase coaching and supervision for implementation; develop teacher capacity to understand data and deliver instruction aligned with each student’s needs; monitor data and adjust instruction	Principals Reading Coaches
Cultural Drift**	Increase visible, vocal support for program and culture elements; engage all stakeholders in communications about needs, roles; communicate data to school, district and school board	Principals Reading Coaches School Leaders Teachers

*Cultural Drift: the loss of urgency for improvement.

**Procedural Drift: when implementation of a program or procedures gradually deviates from the most effective application or recommended use, commonly leading to diminished effectiveness.

Reading Culture: Implementation and Sustainability



Leadership and Strong Reading Culture Have Greatest Potential

Of all the elements of a school-wide reading model, such as Reading First, leadership and a strong reading culture have the greatest potential for sustaining the model over time as initial funding streams disappear. Other elements, such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, coaching, and use of time and other resources, are primarily procedural. There are criteria and procedures for how best to implement them. If these procedures are followed, implementation is likely to be positive, and outcomes are likely to improve. Yet none of these things are likely to happen without effective leadership and the cultural foundation upon which to implement these procedures—the “common ground” upon which the procedural and structural elements stand.

“Effective schools ... [send] a constant stream of unambiguous signals to students and staff about what their roles and responsibilities are [and what the expectations and tolerance limits are]. The school does this through its organizational culture.”

(Jerald, 2005) ²

With respect to sustainability, or “the ability of the staff to keep procedures in place and the improved outcomes occurring, even after initial funding disappears” (adapted from Century and Levy, 2002), a strong reading culture is the one element with the potential to sustain an improved reading program over time. Leadership comes and goes, and new leaders may have differing priorities or may not have the focus or charisma needed to provide the driving force for sustainability. For this reason, the school reading culture is uniquely essential in continuing the good work and

improved outcomes that have stemmed from the original Reading First funding.

No Direct Costs

The good news is that a strong reading culture costs nothing to implement and continue. It requires only a few good character traits—will, persistence, and determination—to ensure that effective practices are carried on over time, even as contexts change (e.g., funding, personnel, and competing priorities). If ownership of the culture is not concentrated just in the principal or a small group of interested staff—rather, if it is distributed across all staff with roots extending into the district leadership, parent community and other community stakeholders, then the reading culture can continue to determine “how we do things here in reading” well into the future, and students can continue to benefit from improved reading instruction for many years to come.

² Jerald, C. (2005). More than maintenance: Sustaining improvements over the long run. *Policy Brief*. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Washington, D.C.

Sustaining Outcomes in Your School

Sustainability of a program like Reading First is not about money. It is about having the will and the determination to carry on. What matters most is not the funding; other funding sources can always be identified by resourceful stakeholders. What matters is the school's commitment to fulfill the mission and the vision of its staff to empower tomorrow's students to become successful readers, an outcome they have already shown to be possible today. The school's reading culture is the heart of what makes that as possible for tomorrow as it has shown to be today.



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